



May 2023

# FEMA DISASTER WORKFORCE

## Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps

Accessible Version

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#### Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA manages and coordinates the federal response and recovery efforts to disasters and other emergencies. In 2022, FEMA awarded \$1.7 billion in disaster grants to survivors. Additionally, FEMA has been tasked with new responsibilities, including a key role in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, GAO has reported on workforce management challenges, such as staffing shortages, within FEMA.

GAO was asked to review FEMA's hiring process and staffing gaps. This report assesses 1) FEMA's authorities and processes for hiring and related challenges, and 2) FEMA's disaster workforce staffing gaps and the extent to which FEMA is monitoring and evaluating its efforts to fill these gaps through hiring.

GAO reviewed FEMA documentation on hiring processes and efforts, and interviewed officials from FEMA on efforts to increase staff and challenges with the hiring process. GAO also analyzed data from fiscal years 2019 through 2022 on FEMA staffing gaps and time frames for hiring.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA (1) document clear and consistent procedures to collect and calculate time-to-hire information; (2) document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's progress on hiring efforts to address staffing gaps; and (3) develop performance measures that monitor and evaluate progress towards goals, including net growth targets for cadres to achieve FEMA's long-term disaster workforce staffing goal. FEMA concurred with the recommendations.

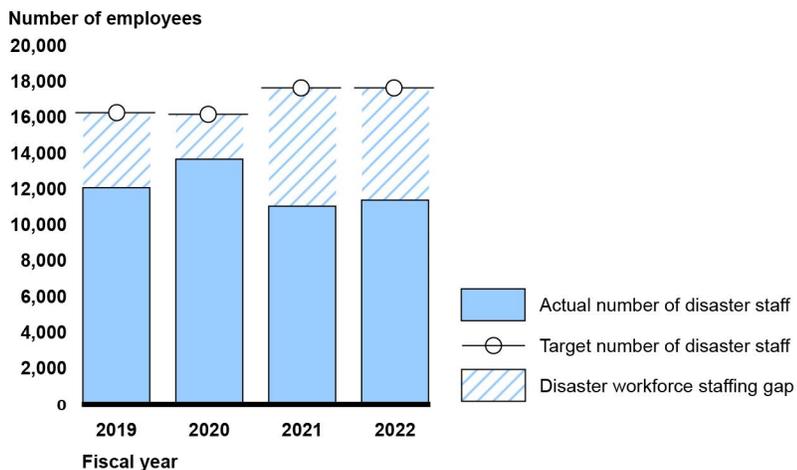
View [GAO-23-105663](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or [CurrieC@gao.gov](mailto:CurrieC@gao.gov)

#### What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) uses different processes under various statutory authorities to hire employees by type, such as permanent full-time employees and temporary reservists. Additionally, FEMA uses hiring flexibilities to hire employees for critical positions and augments its workforce if a disaster or emergency exceeds FEMA's capacity, such as with local hires and contractors, among others. FEMA also reports its time frames for hiring employees, known as time-to-hire, on a quarterly basis to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). However, GAO found FEMA has challenges calculating and reporting consistent and accurate timeframes for hiring to DHS. Documenting consistent methods would help FEMA accurately calculate its timeframes for hiring and use more reliable information to determine potential workforce changes needed to better prepare for future emergencies.

As of the beginning of fiscal year 2022, FEMA had approximately 11,400 disaster employees on board and a staffing goal of 17,670, creating an overall staffing gap of approximately 6,200 staff (35 percent) across different positions. FEMA officials attributed recent staffing gaps to multiple factors. These included additional responsibilities due to COVID-19 and managing the rising disaster activity during the year, which increased burnout and employee attrition.

**Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019 through 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-105663

**Accessible Data for Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019 through 2022**

Fiscal year	Actual number of disaster staff	Target number of disaster staff
2019	12096	16290
2020	13690	16195
2021	11062	17670
2022	11401	17670

Starting in 2019, FEMA initiated several efforts, including hiring events and use of contractors, to increase its disaster workforce and reduce these gaps. While FEMA is taking steps to address staffing gaps, GAO found that it is unclear if these efforts are effective. FEMA lacks documented plans and performance measures to monitor and evaluate its hiring progress within cadres (workforce groups) toward the larger disaster workforce goal. Without documented plans and measures, such as cadre net growth targets, it is difficult for FEMA to determine how effective hiring efforts are at closing staffing gaps and prioritizing hiring efforts within the disaster workforce accordingly.

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**Abbreviations**

CORE	Cadre of On-Call Response and Recovery Employees
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
Stafford Act	Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act

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May 2, 2023

The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Homeland Security  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Troy A. Carter, Sr.  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology  
Committee on Homeland Security  
House of Representatives

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) leads our nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against the risk of disasters. Each year FEMA responds and provides support to a significant number of disasters and emergencies. In 2022, FEMA reported providing assistance for 57 major disaster and emergency declarations, such as Hurricane Ian and Hurricane Fiona, 34 fire incidents, and awarded approximately \$1.7 billion in grants to disaster survivors. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in 2021, there were 20 weather and climate-related disaster events with losses exceeding \$1 billion each in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, FEMA responded and provided support to 230 presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters, an all-time high. According to FEMA, more frequent, severe, and complex disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have created an unprecedented demand for FEMA's workforce.

FEMA provides assistance in responding to a disaster when effective response and recovery are beyond the capabilities of state and local governments. As of April 2022, FEMA employed over 22,000 individuals to manage its disaster response. In recent years, we have reported on workforce management challenges within FEMA, such as challenges related to staffing shortages, workforce qualifications, and staff

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<sup>1</sup>The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and its centers manage archives of atmospheric, coastal, geophysical, and oceanic research in the world, including environmental data. NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) *U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters* (2023), accessed February 2023, <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/>.

development, and their impact. For example, we reported in May 2020 that FEMA faced staffing shortages across over half of its cadres when disasters made landfall or began during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, resulting in fewer staff available to deploy for disasters or emergencies.<sup>2</sup> Cadres are groups organized by operational or programmatic functions.

In addition to its responsibilities responding to the rising number of disasters and other emergencies, prior and current administrations have tasked FEMA with new responsibilities, including playing a key role in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, it established mass vaccination sites and provided funeral assistance to families, the scope of which was unprecedented for the agency. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund—the primary source of federal disaster assistance for state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, as well as individuals—had never been used during a nationwide public health emergency. As of December 2022, FEMA had obligated nearly \$110 billion from the Disaster Relief Fund to respond to COVID-19, according to FEMA's January 2023 *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report to Congress*.<sup>3</sup> FEMA also assisted in the Afghan refugee resettlement efforts and helped provide shelter and emergency supplies for unaccompanied children at the southwest border.

In light of concerns about FEMA's human capital needs, you asked us to review issues related to FEMA's hiring process and staffing gaps. This report examines: (1) FEMA's authorities and processes for hiring and related challenges, and (2) FEMA's disaster workforce staffing gaps and the extent to which FEMA is monitoring and evaluating its efforts to fill these gaps through hiring.

To examine what FEMA's hiring processes are and any related challenges, we collected and reviewed FEMA documentation related to hiring, such as policies and guidance for hiring different FEMA employee types. We also met with officials from FEMA's Human Capital Office and Field Operations Directorate to further understand the different processes for hiring under statutory authorities, as well as the challenges FEMA

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<sup>2</sup>GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges*, [GAO-20-360](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 4, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report to Congress as of December 31, 2022* (January 11, 2023).

faces when hiring.<sup>4</sup> We collected hiring data from the most recent fiscal years, fiscal years 2019 through 2022, on FEMA’s time frames for hiring, which FEMA uses to report to the Department of Homeland Security and inform management about hiring decision-making. We assessed the hiring processes against internal control principles related to documentation and quality information in the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* for the purposes of calculating and reporting hiring time frames.<sup>5</sup>

To determine the reliability of data related to hiring time frames (also known as time-to-hire), we interviewed knowledgeable FEMA officials and conducted basic electronic testing on the data.<sup>6</sup> When asked about potential limitations of the data, FEMA officials cited challenges with its data system and potential data integrity issues. We also identified inconsistencies in how FEMA calculated its time frames for hiring. As a result, we determined FEMA’s hiring data were not sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting FEMA time frames for hiring, overall or by other aspects, such as by employee type or hiring steps, as discussed later in the report.

To identify FEMA’s staffing gaps and the extent to which FEMA is monitoring and evaluating efforts to fill these staffing gaps through hiring, we collected and reviewed FEMA documentation related to hiring, such as internal reports and results of FEMA’s efforts to hire more staff. We also met with officials from FEMA’s Human Capital Office and Field Operations Directorate to further understand FEMA’s different hiring efforts to fill staffing gaps, as well as the challenges FEMA faces when hiring disaster staff. We assessed FEMA’s hiring efforts against internal control principles related to documentation and monitoring in the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, as well as

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<sup>4</sup>FEMA’s Human Capital Office and Field Operations Directorate are FEMA’s key offices responsible for hiring and staffing, as discussed later in the report.

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

<sup>6</sup>FEMA uses the Office of Personnel Management’s definitions of time-to-hire, which state agencies will report time-to-hire with two distinct end dates – from the time the hiring need is validated by a hiring manager to (1) the applicant’s acceptance of a tentative offer, and (2) the day of the new employee enters on duty (i.e., starts work).

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monitoring and evaluation principles in the *Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*.<sup>7</sup>

We collected and analyzed hiring and staffing data from the most recent fiscal years, from fiscal years 2019 to 2022, on FEMA's staffing targets and actual on-boarded staff. We used the number of staff as our unit of measurement in this report, as opposed to full-time equivalents, because FEMA officials told us they use this method to measure staffing gaps and prioritize hiring for specific positions. To determine the reliability of the staffing targets data, we interviewed FEMA officials about their methodology for developing the staffing targets. We discussed their disaster workforce review process, including statistical modeling methods, outputs, and field feedback, as well as any potential limitations with the data. We also reviewed related documentation and discussed the use of the statistical modeling process to identify staffing gaps with FEMA's subject matter experts. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for purposes of reporting FEMA's identified staffing gaps among its disaster workforce.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2022 to May 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

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### Overview of FEMA's Disaster Workforce

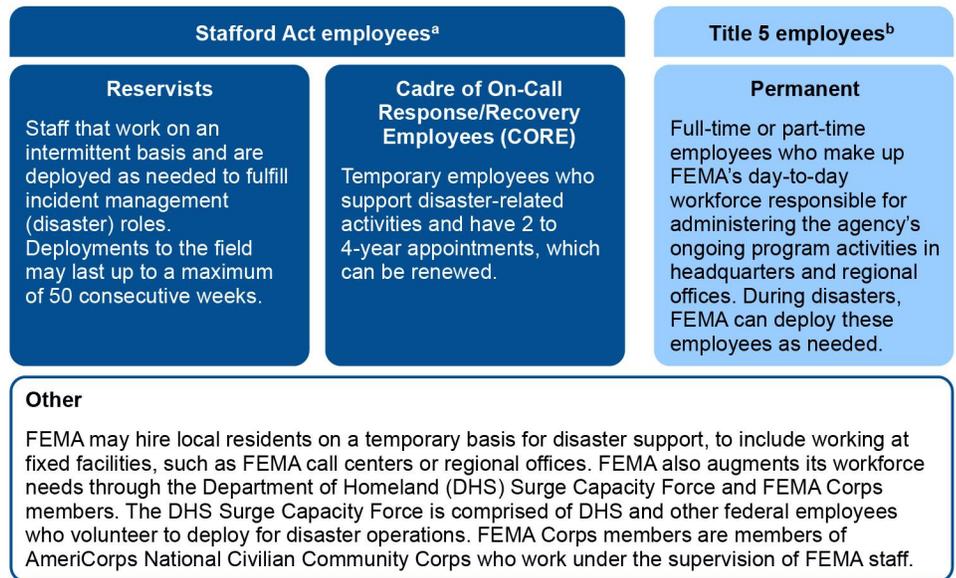
The federal disaster workforce is designed to scale up or down depending on the timing and magnitude of disasters. Specifically, under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act),

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<sup>7</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#); GAO, *Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

FEMA has the authority to augment its permanent full-time staff with temporary personnel and deploy non-FEMA staff members when needed.<sup>8</sup> FEMA has historically relied on both permanent and temporary staff members to respond to presidentially declared disasters. FEMA has several different employee types, as shown in figure 1, that operate out of the agency’s national headquarters, regional offices, and joint field offices at specific disaster locations.

**Figure 1: Summary of Employee Types in the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) Disaster Workforce**



Source: GAO summary of FEMA documents. | GAO-23-105663

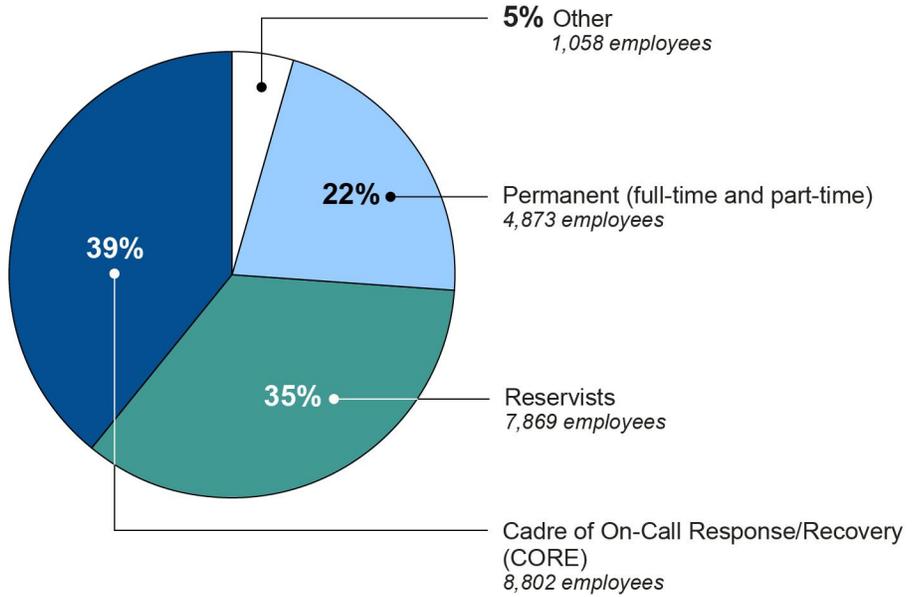
<sup>a</sup>The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) generally defines the federal government’s role during response and recovery after a presidential major disaster or emergency declaration and provides that FEMA may hire temporary personnel as may be necessary, without regard to the provisions of title 5 governing appointments in competitive service. 42 U.S.C. § 5149.

<sup>b</sup>Title 5 refers to the title of the United States Code that generally establishes the law for managing human resources in the federal government. Title 5 employees can be hired on a permanent or temporary, full- or part-time basis.

As shown in figure 2, the Cadre of On-Call Response and Recovery Employees (CORE) made up the largest portion of FEMA’s workforce at the beginning of fiscal year 2022, followed by reservists, permanent full-time and part-time employees, and other employees, such as local hires.

<sup>8</sup>See 42 U.S.C. § 5149.

**Figure 2: Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Workforce by Employee Type, Beginning of Fiscal Year 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-105663

**Accessible Data for Figure 2: Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Workforce by Employee Type, Beginning of Fiscal Year 2022**

	Number of employees	Percentage
<b>Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery (CORE)</b>	8802	39%
<b>Reservists</b>	7869	35%
<b>Permanent (full-time and part-time)</b>	4873	22%
<b>Other</b>	1058	5%

Note: Permanent full-time employees are federal employees that support FEMA's mission areas and operations on a daily basis. Reservists are temporary not-to-exceed 2-year appointments who work intermittently as required during incident management operations and must be available to deploy as needed. Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (CORE) are a type of temporary full-time employee hired to directly support response and recovery efforts related to disasters. Other includes local hires (830), temporary employees (132), Senior Executive Service and Schedule C employees (95) and a Presidential appointment requiring Senate confirmation (1). Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Every FEMA employee is assigned to one or more of four position categories. Staff assigned to incident management positions deploy to disaster sites to administer federal emergency response and recovery programs. Staff assigned to the other three position categories—incident support, ancillary support, and mission essential—provide support

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services to deployed incident management staff, as well as to FEMA more generally.

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## FEMA Cadres

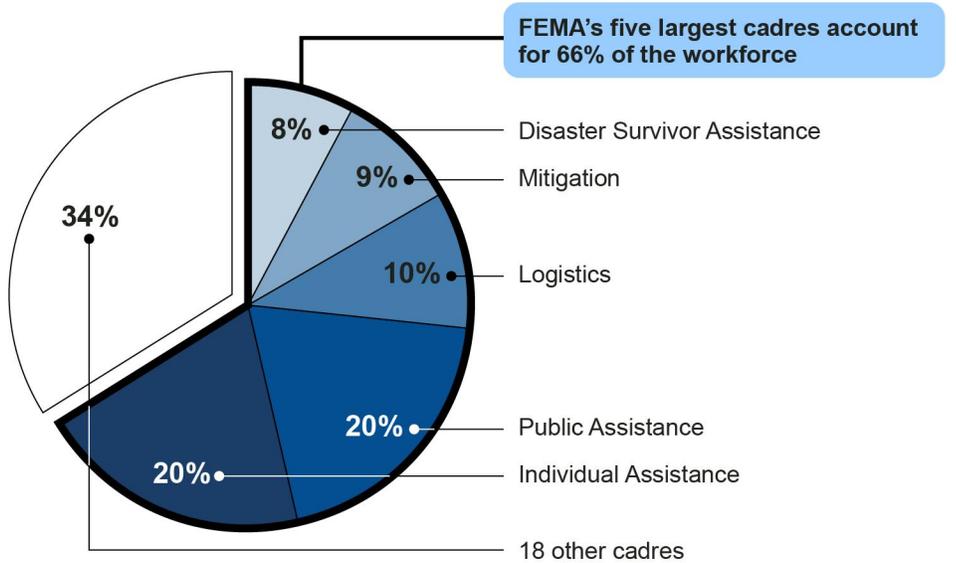
FEMA's incident management workforce, or disaster workforce, is organized into 23 cadres.<sup>9</sup> Cadres are groups of FEMA employees organized by type of work (organizational or programmatic function). These groups are based on skills and experience and generally deploy to an incident at varying points in the response and recovery phases, depending on their functions. For example, the Public Assistance cadre administers assistance to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, as well as certain types of private non-profit organizations, for debris removal, implementation of emergency protective measures, and permanent restoration of infrastructure.

FEMA's five largest cadres – (1) Public Assistance; (2) Individual Assistance; (3) Logistics; (4) Hazard Mitigation; and (5) Disaster Survivor Assistance – represented two-thirds of their incident management workforce (just over 10,000 employees) at the beginning of fiscal year 2022, as shown in figure 3. The other 18 cadres represent the other third of their disaster workforce (just over 5,000 employees).

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<sup>9</sup>FEMA's cadre program areas are: Acquisitions, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Civil Rights, Disability Integration, Disaster Emergency Communications, Disaster Field Training Operations, Disaster Survivor Assistance, Environmental Historic Preservation, External Affairs, Field Leadership, Financial Management, Hazard Mitigation, Human Resources, Individual Assistance, Information Technology, Logistics, Interagency Recovery Coordination, Office of Chief Counsel, Operations, Planning, Public Assistance, Safety, and Security.

**Figure 3: Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Disaster Workforce by Cadre, Beginning of Fiscal Year 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-105663

**Accessible Data for Figure 3: Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Disaster Workforce by Cadre, Beginning of Fiscal Year 2022**

Cadre	Percentage of workforce
Individual Assistance	20%
Public Assistance	20%
Logistics	10%
Mitigation	9%
Disaster Survivor Assistance	8%
18 other cadres	34%

Note: Cadres are FEMA groups of employees organized by type of work. These groups are based on skills and experience and generally deploy to an incident at varying points in the response and recovery phases, depending on their functions. The 18 other cadres are: Acquisitions, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Civil Rights, Disability Integration, Disaster Emergency Communications, Disaster Field Training Operations, Environmental Historic Preservation, External Affairs, Field Leadership, Financial Management, Human Resources, Information Technology, Interagency Recovery Coordination, Office of Chief Counsel, Operations, Planning, Safety, and Security. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

FEMA employees' roles and responsibilities vary depending on their employee type, position category, and credentials, among other considerations. For example, a permanent staff employee may work day-to-day in a FEMA headquarters office, such as FEMA's Office of Policy

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and Program Analysis, but may also serve as a Logistics Specialist in FEMA's Logistics cadre if the employee is certified with a cadre skill, task or experience.<sup>10</sup>

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## FEMA Offices Responsible for Hiring and Staffing

FEMA's Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer is the lead entity responsible for recruitment, hiring, and retention within FEMA. For the purposes of this report, we refer to this office as FEMA Human Capital. FEMA Human Capital also collects and reports information related to the agency's time frames for hiring employees, known as time-to-hire, to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). FEMA Human Capital uses the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) definitions of time-to-hire, which state agencies will report time-to-hire with two distinct end dates – from the time the hiring need is validated by a hiring manager<sup>11</sup> to (1) the applicant's acceptance of a tentative offer, and (2) the day of the new employee enters on duty (i.e., starts work).

FEMA's Field Operations Directorate is the lead entity responsible for setting incident management (disaster) staffing targets and deploying staff to disaster sites. In addition, the Field Operations Directorate organizes the disaster workforce, and ensures training and qualifications of the incident workforce. This component is also responsible for providing disaster-related training to the disaster workforce.

FEMA Human Capital works with the Field Operations Directorate to understand FEMA's disaster requirements, set staffing targets, and hire the individuals the cadres select. For example, officials told us FEMA Human Capital and Field Operations Directorate work together during the annual review of FEMA's disaster workforce to establish staffing targets and identify gaps, as discussed in more detail later in this report.

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<sup>10</sup>FEMA's Office of Policy and Program Analysis is responsible for policy coordination, analysis, and driving linkages between strategy, budget execution, performance integration and accountability, among other things.

<sup>11</sup>FEMA officials are to take multiple steps prior to validate a hiring need, such as identifying the vacancy within an office, ensuring funding for salary and benefits is available, discussing position duties, and discussing recruitment options, among others.

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## FEMA Uses Various Hiring Authorities and Processes, but Has Challenges Calculating Consistent and Accurate Hiring Time Frames

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### FEMA Hiring Processes and Authorities Depend on Employee Type

FEMA uses different processes under Title 5 and the Stafford Act to hire its employees.<sup>12</sup> In addition, FEMA uses hiring flexibilities to quickly hire employees to meet critical position needs and augments additional workforce needs through the DHS Surge Capacity Force, the AmeriCorps' FEMA Corps, and contractors.

**Title 5 (Competitive hiring).** Under Title 5, FEMA hires permanent employees generally through a competitive process that requires various steps, such as posting a job announcement for open competition and applying preferences for veteran applicants, among others. Permanent employees make up FEMA's workforce that is responsible for supporting FEMA's mission areas and operations on a daily basis, and administering programs in the headquarters and regional offices. Under the Title 5 competitive process, FEMA identifies and validates there is a hiring need to fill a vacancy and FEMA Human Capital drafts a job announcement in coordination with the corresponding FEMA Program or Regional Office.

Once finalized, FEMA Human Capital posts the job announcement on the USAJOBS website.<sup>13</sup> After the announcement closes, FEMA Human Capital staff review applicants for minimum qualifications and select eligible candidates for further review (known as a selection certificate or certificate of eligibles). The Program or Regional Office reviews the certificate, conducts interviews, and makes selections. FEMA Human

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<sup>12</sup>Under Title 5, which is the title of the United States Code that generally establishes the law for managing human resources in the federal government, employees can be hired on either a full- or part-time basis. The Stafford Act generally defines the federal government's role during response and recovery after a presidential major disaster or emergency declaration and provides that FEMA may hire temporary personnel as may be necessary, without regard to the provisions of title 5 governing appointments in competitive service. 42 U.S.C. § 5149.

<sup>13</sup>Since 1996, USAJOBS has helped agencies fill civil service job vacancies by informing job seekers about job openings they may be eligible for and how to apply for them. Office of Personnel Management, accessed February 2023, <https://www.usajobs.gov/>.

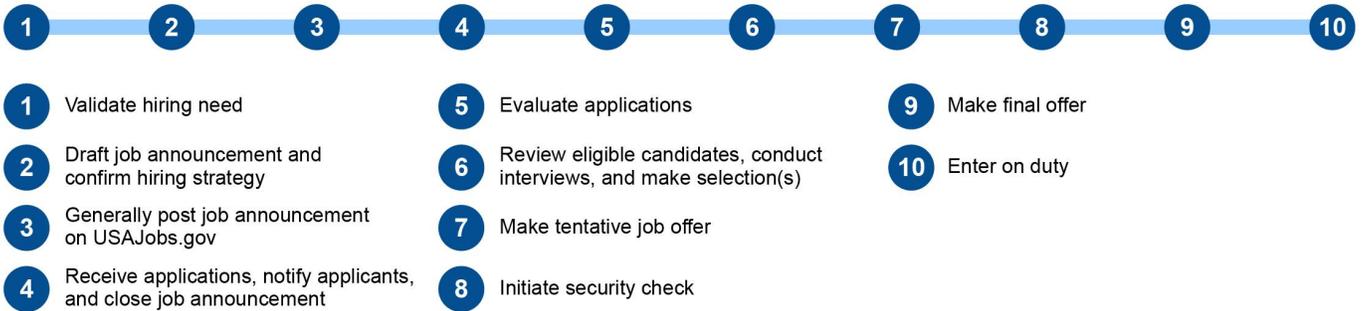
Capital extends a tentative job offer to the selected candidate or candidates. FEMA then initiates a background investigation for security. Once completed, FEMA Human Capital may then extend a final job offer to the selected candidates. If accepted, FEMA and the candidate negotiate an entry-on-duty date, among other details.

**Stafford Act (Non-competitive hiring).** Under the Stafford Act, FEMA hires temporary personnel to carry out disaster-related activities who are exempt from provisions of Title 5 governing the competitive service, including competitive examination, rating and ranking, among others. As such, although FEMA may post job announcements on USAJOBS for Stafford Act positions, FEMA may also hire individuals through a noncompetitive process referred to as a 'name request'. Name requests are alternative hiring procedures by which FEMA solicits candidates through venues other than the USAJOBS website. For example, FEMA may solicit and hire candidates via employee referrals. According to FEMA officials, current FEMA employees may send names of persons, friends or family members they believe may be suitable to FEMA workforce.

FEMA may also solicit and hire candidates via other venues, such as referrals from state and local partners, recruitment events, and internal announcements. FEMA guidance for name requests states program offices must submit a justification in writing that describes the qualifications of an individual referred and that a division chief must approve it. FEMA's Human Capital Office also determines if the person referred meets minimum qualifications. Additionally, FEMA guidance states that FEMA must also interview individuals referred via name requests, check references, and follow job offer procedures. FEMA's Stafford Act employee types include Cadre of On-Call Response Employees (CORE) employees and reservists. See figure 4 for more information on FEMA's competitive and non-competitive hiring steps under Title 5 and the Stafford Act.

**Figure 4: Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Competitive and Non-Competitive Hiring Steps**

**Competitive (Title 5)**



**Non-competitive (Stafford Act)**



Source: GAO summary of FEMA documents. | GAO-23-105663

Note: Under Title 5, which is the title of the United States Code that generally establishes the law for managing human resources in the federal government, employees can be hired on either a full- or part-time basis. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) generally defines the federal government's role during response and recovery after a presidential major disaster or emergency declaration and provides that FEMA may hire temporary personnel as may be necessary, without regard to the provisions of title 5 governing appointments in competitive service. 42 U.S.C. § 5149.

FEMA officials stated that hiring managers use Title 5 or Stafford Act processes to hire employees based on the type of position. They noted that for CORE, which are Stafford Act positions, they follow OPM qualification standards that state applicants must have 1 year of specialized experience at the next lower position level to qualify and be hired for that position. However, that is not a rule for Stafford Act reservist or local hires. Additionally, if a position requires more FEMA-specific disaster experience, a hiring manager may choose to look inward and hire through a name request under the Stafford Act.

**Hiring flexibilities.** In addition to its traditional hiring authorities, FEMA officials told us they use hiring flexibilities to quickly hire qualified candidates for critical positions. FEMA officials stated there are many

hiring flexibilities, and hiring managers can appoint individuals under hiring authorities without posting a job announcement. However, even if FEMA posts a job announcement for a position, FEMA still also has flexibilities that allow it to hire non-competitive eligible applicants.<sup>14</sup> In fiscal year 2021 through mid-April 2022, FEMA primarily used 11 hiring flexibilities under Title 5 to hire qualified candidates for critical positions. Half of the 11 hiring flexibilities FEMA used accounted for over 92 percent of the combined fiscal year 2021 and 2022 appointments using hiring flexibilities (401 appointments).<sup>15</sup>

**Other staff for FEMA workforce augmentation.** FEMA also has the authority to augment its disaster workforce in various ways. Local hires are local residents who FEMA hires on a temporary basis for disaster support, to include working at fixed facilities, such as FEMA call centers or regional offices.<sup>16</sup> The Secretary of Homeland Security can also activate members of the DHS Surge Capacity Force if a disaster or emergency exceeds the capacity of the FEMA disaster workforce.<sup>17</sup> FEMA Corps are members of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community

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<sup>14</sup>Non-competitive eligible applicants include veterans who meet Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA) (if applicable due to grade level) or Veterans Employment Opportunity Act (VEOA) requirements; military spouses; individuals with disabilities; certain current or former land and base management employees; family members of overseas federal employees or uniformed service members; current and former Peace Corps/AmeriCorps Vista employee and/or volunteers; and any applicant eligible under a special hiring authority outlined by the Office of Personnel Management.

<sup>15</sup>Specifically, FEMA primarily used the following hiring flexibilities in fiscal year 2021 and through mid-April 2022: (1) Veteran with a Service-Connected Disability of 30% or More Appointments; (2) Direct Hire Appointments; (3) Schedule A Disability Related Appointments; (4) Schedule A Non-Disability Related Appointments; and (5) Schedule D Appointments - Intern Program. The remaining hiring flexibilities accounted for 7 percent of the overall appointments — (6) Experts/Consultants Appointments; (7) Military Spouse appointments; (8) Peace Corps/VISTA appointments; (9) Schedule C (Presidential or Head of Agency) appointments; (10) Schedule D appointments (Presidential Management Fellows Program); and (11) Schedule D appointments (Recent Graduates Program). Generally, FEMA's use of hiring flexibilities is comparable to other federal agencies. We previously found that federal agencies used a relatively small number of the hiring flexibilities available to them. For more information, see GAO, *Federal Hiring: OPM Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Hiring Authorities*, [GAO-16-521](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2016).

<sup>16</sup>Local hires are hired for 120 days, and their term of employment may be extended in increments of 120 days.

<sup>17</sup>Surge Capacity Force members can deploy up to 45 days. The Secretary of Homeland Security can also request to extend deployments for members from DHS component agencies.

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Corps who work under supervision of FEMA staff.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, FEMA can augment its workforce with technical assistance contractors, who are specialized contractors hired to perform specific responsibilities.

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## FEMA Lacks Consistent Procedures and Documentation for Accurately Calculating its Time Frames for Hiring

FEMA has regularly reported its time frames for hiring employees, also known as time-to-hire, on a quarterly basis to DHS.<sup>19</sup> As of 2021, FEMA prepares these quarterly reports using hiring data compiled from various reports from its hiring case management system. FEMA Human Capital tracks the dates applicants go through various steps of the hiring process in the system, and officials said the agency uses this information to inform management decisions about staffing and hiring. For example, FEMA officials said they use time-to-hire information to determine if FEMA is hiring in a timely manner. Additionally, they stated that they analyze time-to-hire for specific positions and hiring phases to identify pain points or bottlenecks in the hiring process, and adjust as needed.

However, we found that FEMA does not consistently and accurately calculate time-to-hire it reports to DHS and internal management due to system challenges and a lack of documented procedures. Our analysis of FEMA hiring data showed inconsistencies in how FEMA calculated its time frames for hiring, such as different methodologies and fields used to calculate time-to-hire. For instance, we found:

- **FEMA uses inconsistent methods to calculate and report time-to-hire.** In different quarters within fiscal year 2021, FEMA used a 'Total Duration' field to report the time-to-hire from when it validated the hiring need to either the applicant's acceptance of a tentative offer or the applicant's entrance on duty day.<sup>20</sup> When we asked FEMA officials how this field was calculated, officials stated that it was inaccurate to use the 'Total Duration' field for any time-to-hire calculations because it did not accurately capture time-to-hire, and they mistakenly used it

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<sup>18</sup>FEMA Corps members serve 10-month terms.

<sup>19</sup>According to FEMA officials, they report time-to-hire information to DHS and DHS reports the information to OPM.

<sup>20</sup>As previously mentioned, agencies are supposed to report time-to-hire with two distinct end dates – from the time the hiring need is validated by a hiring manager to (1) the applicant's acceptance of a tentative offer and (2) the day the new employee's entrance on duty.

in prior reports. For example, in the third quarter of fiscal year 2021, we found that FEMA underreported the average days it took for applicants to complete the hiring process and enter on duty to DHS. Specifically, they underreported the time-to-hire by 16 days because they mistakenly used the 'Total Duration' field. In other quarters, FEMA officials used various combinations of fields to calculate the two definitions of time-to-hire, such as different starting points in the hiring process, which FEMA officials said they sometimes did because of missing or inaccurate data in the case management system.

- **FEMA uses different groups of hiring cases to calculate time-to-hire.** FEMA officials said they removed some hiring cases from time-to-hire calculations and not others because of misinterpretations of direction from leadership for reporting time-to-hire. For example, for one quarter in fiscal year 2021, FEMA officials said they removed hiring cases that did not begin and end in the same quarter. However, they subsequently realized this resulted in the exclusion of some hiring cases from any of its reports to DHS. FEMA also used local hire cases in some of its time-to-hire calculations, which FEMA officials said were errors and should never be included, because they skew the time-to-hire results (i.e., make the results appear shorter). FEMA officials also stated if Human Resource specialists accidentally failed to enter one key date in the system, such as the date an applicant enters on duty, they would exclude the case from their time-to-hire calculations entirely, further skewing the results.<sup>21</sup>

FEMA also does not have documented guidance or procedures outlining the steps it takes to collect and calculate time-to-hire. Prior to 2021, FEMA officials said they collected information and calculated time-to-hire manually based on data fields discussed among FEMA Human Capital staff and using their professional judgment. Since they began using the hiring case management system in 2021, FEMA officials said they have been discussing how to ensure they use more complete, consistent, and accurate fields to calculate and report time-to-hire. For instance, FEMA officials stated they are striving to use the same starting point to calculate time-to-hire. Additionally, FEMA officials said they discussed with DHS and OPM officials which data fields they should use from FEMA's system to meet reporting requirements that align with OPM hiring steps. However, FEMA did not document these decisions. FEMA officials described steps they take to calculate time-to-hire over a series of

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<sup>21</sup>FEMA officials stated they have ongoing efforts to flag missing dates and manually enter the correct dates during the review process. However, officials stated that since they are reporting averages, not every case is checked for missing dates.

conversations with us. However, as of December 2022, FEMA still lacked clear documentation on how it collects and assesses its time-to-hire, which led to FEMA's inability to accurately know how long it takes for FEMA to hire, and inconsistent reporting to DHS.

FEMA officials stated that the data system they use is not designed for reporting time frames for hiring and as a result, their process for collecting and analyzing the information on time-to-hire is piecemeal. FEMA officials acknowledged that data system challenges, such as needing to merge different data from the case management system to calculate time-to-hire, may create data integrity issues. However, they noted no off-the-shelf system meets FEMA's unique hiring needs, and creating such a system would be cost prohibitive. They said they are doing the best they can with the system they have within the budget they have. While we understand FEMA's budget constraints, FEMA could help enhance the reliability of what it reports within the system it uses by documenting its decisions and steps for calculating time-to-hire. Additionally, they said the various steps FEMA officials must take to modify and assess the time-to-hire data using the current system make it difficult to document steps and procedures, though they have some documentation in emails. Instead, the officials said they rely on multiple FEMA staff to prepare the time-to-hire data analyses and perform quality checks.

*Standards for Internal Controls in the Federal Government* state management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.<sup>22</sup> Quality information is appropriate, current, complete, accurate, accessible, and provided on a timely basis. The standards also call for documentation to demonstrate the design, implementation, and operating effectiveness of an entity's internal control system. The standards state that documentation provides a means to retain organizational knowledge and mitigate the risk of having that knowledge limited to a few personnel, as well as a means to communicate that knowledge, as needed, to external parties. For example, documenting the steps for collecting and analyzing time-to-hire in a standard operating procedure rather than individuals' emails would help FEMA retain and institutionalize its processes (if employees responsible for the analysis currently are no longer with the agency in the future) and also ensure its methods are consistent over time.

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<sup>22</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#)

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As FEMA officials discuss and determine the best way to collect and analyze time-to-hire information, documenting the decisions and steps they take would help ensure they collect the information they need in a timely manner and use a consistent methodology to calculate time-to-hire. For example, documenting steps, such as which population of hiring cases to include or exclude, and which fields and formulas to use, would help ensure consistent calculations and reporting to DHS, OPM, and internal management. Documenting its methods would also help FEMA mitigate potential misinterpretations of direction from leadership and ensure knowledge and methods are passed on to new or other FEMA staff doing time-to-hire analyses.

More broadly, documented procedures will also help ensure the time-to-hire information FEMA is using to make decisions is reliable, and help FEMA officials target potential areas for improvement. With consistent methods for collecting key dates and calculating time-to-hire, FEMA can more accurately and reliably use this information to quantify the extent to which different steps in the hiring process versus other factors, such as a candidate's responsiveness to agency inquiries, impact their time-to-hire. Furthermore, these steps could improve FEMA management's ability to oversee and make decisions on the workforce planning and the implementation of preparedness actions vis-à-vis future potential emergencies overall.

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## FEMA Has Taken Steps to Address Staffing Gaps, but Opportunities Exist to Better Monitor and Evaluate Hiring Efforts

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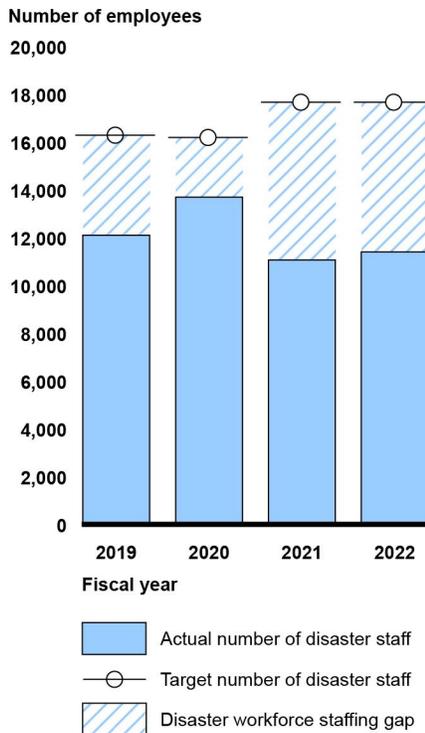
### FEMA's Staffing Gaps Vary by Year and Cadre

FEMA officials stated they conduct annual reviews of its disaster workforce to establish staffing targets and identify gaps, known as the Force Structure Modification Process. During this process, FEMA uses statistical modeling methods to estimate a baseline of the number of staff it needs. With the model outputs, FEMA officials stated that management also receives feedback from the cadres to determine where to target staffing and makes adjustments, as needed. FEMA officials stated management considers the model outputs and cadre feedback, and then approves final staffing targets, known as the force structure. FEMA officials then compare its force structure targets with its force strength, or

the actual number of on-boarded employees in each cadre position, to determine staffing gaps.

In recent years, FEMA determined it needed to increase its disaster workforce given the increase in its responsibilities and disasters. In May 2019, FEMA used statistical modeling and cadre feedback to develop an overall force structure (staffing) target of 17,670 disaster employees across all cadres. FEMA aimed to reach this target by fiscal year 2024, but has since pushed it out to fiscal year 2026, due to setbacks and additional responsibilities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. As of the beginning of fiscal year 2022, FEMA had a disaster force strength of approximately 11,400 employees, creating an overall staffing gap of approximately 6,200 staff (35 percent) across different positions and cadres. See figure 5 for more information on FEMA overall staffing gaps from fiscal years 2019 through 2022.

**Figure 5: Overall Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019-2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-105663

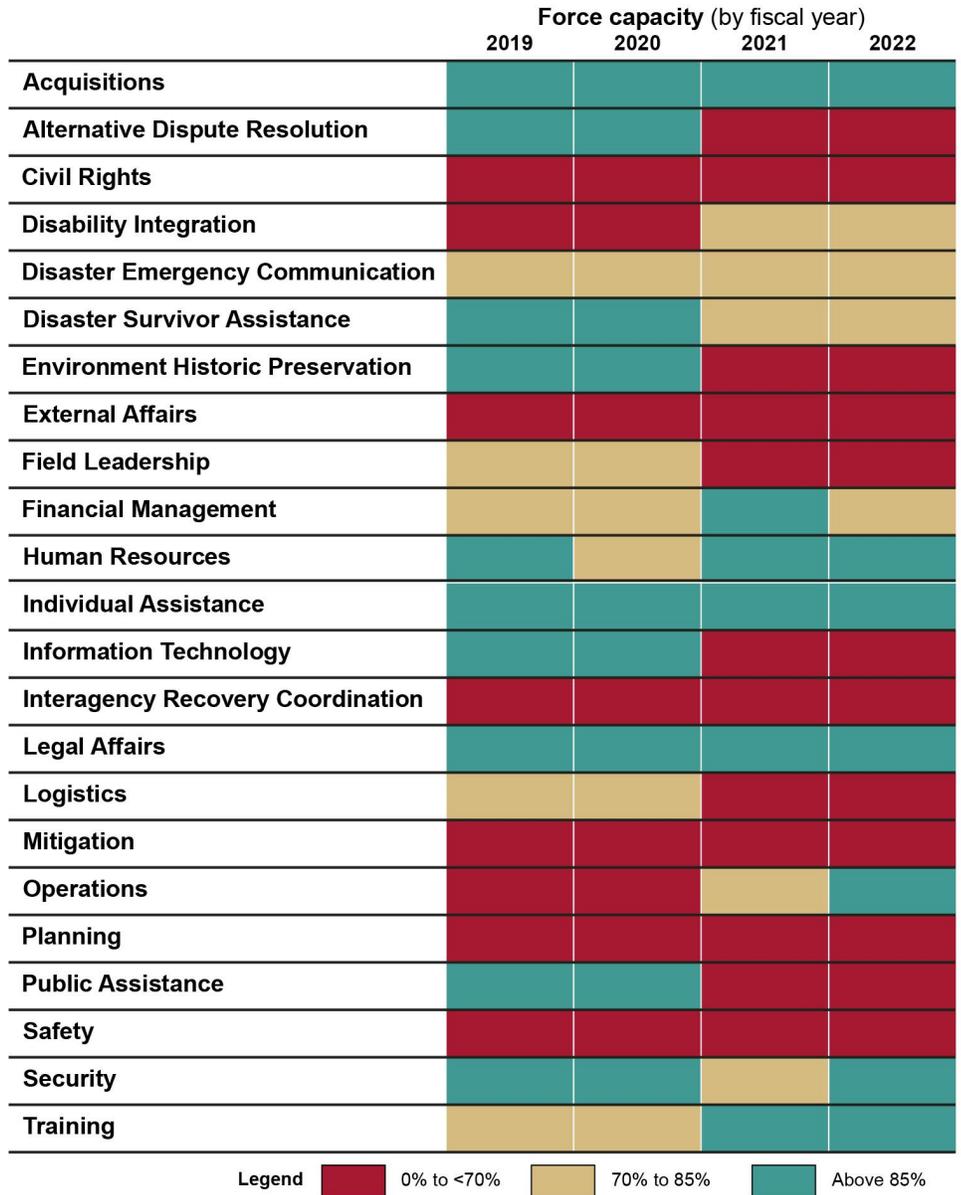
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**Accessible Data for Figure 5: Overall Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019-2022**

Fiscal year	Actual number of disaster staff	Target number of disaster staff
2019	12096	16290
2020	13690	16195
2021	11062	17670
2022	11401	17670

While we found FEMA's disaster workforce was operating at approximately 65 percent capacity at the beginning of fiscal year 2022, the force capacities varied widely across the cadres. Force capacity (also referred to as a fill rate) indicates the rate by which FEMA fills or makes progress toward its estimated force structure targets with its actual force strength. For example, one of FEMA's largest cadres, the Individual Assistance cadre, was operating at a force capacity of approximately 89 percent at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. The Individual Assistance cadre provides individuals and families affected by disasters access to a range of FEMA programs and information. Additionally, other cadres, such as the Acquisitions cadre, which negotiates contracts between the agency and outside entities for goods and services, exceeded their staffing targets in fiscal year 2022. On the other hand, other large cadres, Public Assistance, Hazard Mitigation, and Logistics, generally had lower force capacities, between 44 and 60 percent at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. These cadres serve important functions including administering assistance to state and local governments, creating safer communities by managing risk reduction activities, and coordinating all aspects of resource planning and movement during a disaster. See figure 6 for more information about cadres' force capacity.

**Figure 6: Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Force Capacity by Cadre**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-105663

**Accessible Data for Figure 6: Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) Force Capacity by Cadre**

<b>Cadre</b>	<b>2019 (fiscal year)</b>	<b>2020 (fiscal year)</b>	<b>2021 (fiscal year)</b>	<b>2022 (fiscal year)</b>
Acquisitions	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent
Alternative Dispute Resolution	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent
Civil Rights	zero percent to less than seventy percent			
Disability Integration	zero percent to less than seventy percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent
Disaster Emergency Communication	seventy percent to eighty-five percent			
Disaster Survivor Assistance	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent
Environment Historic Preservation	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent
External Affairs	zero percent to less than seventy percent			
Field Leadership	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent
Financial Management	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent
Human Resources	above eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent
Individual Assistance	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent
Information Technology	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent	zero percent to less than seventy percent
Interagency Recovery Coordination	zero percent to less than seventy percent			

Cadre	2019 (fiscal year)	2020 (fiscal year)	2021 (fiscal year)	2022 (fiscal year)
Legal Affairs	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent
Logistics	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	zero percent to less than seven percent	zero percent to less than seven percent
Mitigation	zero percent to less than seven percent			
Operations	zero percent to less than seven percent	zero percent to less than seven percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent
Planning	zero percent to less than seven percent			
Public Assistance	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	zero percent to less than seven percent	zero percent to less than seven percent
Safety	zero percent to less than seven percent			
Security	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent
Training	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	seventy percent to eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent	above eighty-five percent

Note: Force capacity (also referred to as a fill rate) indicates the rate by which FEMA fills or makes progress toward its estimated force structure targets with its actual force strength. We based the ranges for force capacity in this figure on ranges FEMA used in its documentation.

FEMA’s staffing gaps were partly due to an increase in force structure targets, which FEMA officials attributed to the growing number of disaster staff needed, as identified during the disaster workforce review in May 2019. Certain cadres had significant changes in their force structure targets between fiscal years 2020 and 2021, including the two of the largest cadres— the Public Assistance and Logistics cadres— that contributed to the growing gap. For example, in the Public Assistance cadre, force structure targets increased by almost 130 percent (from about 1,780 staff to over 4,000 staff) and the Logistics cadre also increased force structure targets by approximately 26 percent (from approximately 1,600 staff to over 2,000 staff).

FEMA officials also attributed recent staffing gaps to the loss of staff due to the year-round pace caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and

increasing number of disasters. FEMA initially increased its disaster workforce by almost 1,600 staff (or 13 percent) from over 12,000 in fiscal year 2019 to over 13,600 in fiscal year 2020. However, during fiscal year 2020, which included the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disaster workforce lost 20 percent of its staff (over 2,600 employees). These losses resulted in staffing gaps in certain positions, and an overall decline in force strength. For example, the Public Assistance cadre lost over 400 staff (approximately 16 percent) in fiscal year 2020. With the increase in staffing targets and reduction in staff, the Public Assistance cadre's force capacity decreased from over 100 percent to about 55 percent. Starting in March 2020, officials stated that they faced additional responsibilities due to COVID, while also managing the traditional seasonal peaks of disaster activity during the year, which created burnout for many employees and increased employee attrition.

During fiscal year 2021, FEMA officials stated they overcame the most difficult operational period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and cadres were better positioned to focus on increasing their capacity. As a result, FEMA's disaster workforce started rebounding, gaining over 300 employees, or 3 percent in fiscal year 2021. Additionally, certain cadres made significant gains in their force strength. For example, the Civil Rights cadre increased its force strength by 37 percent during fiscal year 2021, although it remained the cadre with the lowest capacity. Despite the growth, FEMA's disaster workforce has not reached its previous peak of over 13,500 employees by the end of fiscal year 2019. FEMA officials acknowledged that staffing shortages continue to be a challenge when responding to disasters, and have taken steps to address the gaps.

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### FEMA Has Hiring Efforts to Address Gaps, but Has Not Evaluated its Progress

Starting in 2019, FEMA initiated several efforts to augment its disaster workforce and reduce staffing gaps through hiring. However, FEMA officials stated that not all staffing gaps are resolved by hiring new staff. For example, some staffing gaps may be filled through promoting staff from within, converting one position to another, or training staff to fulfill a staffing need. As a result, FEMA developed various efforts focused on hiring to partially address staffing gaps among their disaster workforce. More specifically:

- **Harness hiring program:** In September 2019, FEMA developed the Harness hiring program, which aimed to support growth in the disaster

workforce, improve the retention of employees, and identify the chokepoints in the hiring process, among other efforts. FEMA officials stated that their Harness program created more collaboration between FEMA's Human Capital Office and the field, and as a result, they ended the Harness program and absorbed the program efforts into their respective offices as of April 2022.

- **Bulk hiring events:** FEMA conducted bulk hiring events for specific positions across cadres. During these events, FEMA Human Capital and cadre management recruited applicants for entry-level cadre positions, held phone interviews, and extended offers to suitable candidates. According to FEMA officials, having Human Capital staff primarily administer various hiring steps and make the selection decisions (in conjunction with cadre management) expedited the hiring process and increased the number of individuals hired for these positions.
- **Contracts and partnerships:** FEMA sought additional support from contractors and other federal agencies, such as OPM and the Department of Labor, to support efforts to increase staff and expand recruitment. For example, contractors reviewed applicant resumes to support FEMA hiring specialists. Additionally, FEMA entered into an interagency agreement with OPM to provide similar support for hiring critical positions. FEMA also entered into a partnership with the Department of Labor's Job Corps to increase disaster staff.<sup>23</sup> According to FEMA officials, the use of contractors and interagency agreements helped increase customer satisfaction and provide more support for FEMA Human Capital in their efforts to hire more people.

While FEMA is taking steps to address staffing gaps through hiring, it is unclear if those efforts are effective due to a lack of documented plans to monitor and evaluate their progress. More specifically, FEMA lacks documented plans on how it will monitor and evaluate efforts to close staffing gaps in cadres. Instead, FEMA officials stated they are discussing a range of strategies informally, referred to as cadre growth discussions. FEMA officials stated they are transitioning to cadre growth discussions because of the end of the Harness program, and changes in human capital needs and leadership. However, without documenting these discussions about cadre hiring strategies, it is difficult for FEMA to

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<sup>23</sup>According to the Department of Labor, Job Corps is a residential career training program through the Department of Labor that helps eligible young people complete their high school education, trains them for meaningful careers, and assists them with obtaining employment.

monitor and evaluate how effective efforts are in closing staffing gaps and prioritize hiring efforts accordingly.

FEMA has annual force structure (staffing) targets, but does not have measures to monitor and evaluate cadres' progress toward its targets. FEMA previously developed staffing targets for specific cadres and positions within the disaster workforce, creating a clear path for how they planned to achieve their long-term goal of 17,670 by fiscal year 2026. However, with the end of the Harness hiring program, FEMA officials stated they will no longer be developing staffing targets for cadres, and only developing an annual target for the entire disaster workforce.<sup>24</sup>

Without staffing targets for cadres, FEMA will no longer be able to determine which cadres are in need of staff and focus its hiring efforts accordingly. For example, FEMA aims to reach 13,485 employees in its disaster workforce by the end of fiscal year 2023, but does not have staffing targets for specific cadres or positions to ensure it is on track to meet its annual staffing target. FEMA officials believed that cadre net growth targets—measuring employee gains versus employee losses against a target by cadre— would be beneficial. However, as of January 2023, officials had not yet developed or established net growth targets for the cadres within the disaster workforce.

Additionally, FEMA has not established performance measures to monitor and evaluate other hiring activities' contributions toward achieving their overall targets. FEMA has data on other aspects of its hiring processes, such as the number of applications it receives, applicants referred, and applicants hired. However, it does not have performance measures to assess these other aspects, such as calculating the percentage of applicants who successfully complete the hiring process and enter on duty, to determine if changes to hiring are needed. FEMA officials stated they do not measure other aspects of hiring because they are not required to do so.

GAO's *Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning* states that agencies should develop performance measures to monitor and evaluate whether the agency achieved its program goals and the link

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<sup>24</sup>FEMA developed annual force structure targets for fiscal years 2022 through 2026 under its Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 reporting. See Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 205. However, these targets are not broken down by specific cadre and position.

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between human capital and program results.<sup>25</sup> This includes developing performance measures that measure:

1. Progress toward reaching human capital goals
2. Contribution of human capital activities toward achieving programmatic goals

Additionally, The *Standards for Internal Control* state that management should document plans to continuously monitor and evaluate identified internal control deficiencies on a timely basis.<sup>26</sup> The standards also state that management should document actions to remediate internal control deficiencies on a timely basis by evaluating and reporting issues and developing corrective actions. The lack of documented plans, interim targets and other measures makes it difficult to evaluate FEMA's progress and develop corrective actions, as needed.

According to FEMA's strategic and human capital plans, FEMA must grow its disaster workforce to meet the rising demand of disasters.<sup>27</sup> While FEMA made gains in certain cadres and positions, it still had an overall staffing gap of 35 percent (6,200 staff) as of fiscal year 2022. FEMA could benefit from documented plans and performance measures, including net growth targets, to monitor progress toward force structure goals, identify root cause issues, and adjust hiring efforts as needed. By developing plans for cadres, FEMA will be able to better monitor progress and ensure it is on track to meet the 17,670 staff target by fiscal year 2026. Additionally, by having performance measures that assess human capital activities, FEMA will be able to focus hiring efforts on specific cadre needs and assess the overall effectiveness of its hiring efforts over time.

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<sup>25</sup>Performance goals are the specific results an agency expects its program to achieve in the near term. FEMA sets both long-term and annual force structure (staffing) targets as part of its performance goal to expand its disaster workforce. Performance measures are concrete, objective, observable conditions that permit the assessment of progress made toward the agency's goals. [GAO-04-39](#)

<sup>26</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#)

<sup>27</sup>Federal Emergency Management Agency, *2022–2026 FEMA Strategic Plan*, (last updated February 3, 2023). Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Human Capital Operating Plan Fiscal Year 2020-2021*.

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## Conclusions

FEMA currently faces an all-time high in disasters and an unparalleled demand on its workforce. As the main agency managing the response to disasters and administering billions of dollars in assistance, efforts to reduce FEMA's overall staffing gap are essential to meeting the needs of survivors. While FEMA has taken steps to address staffing gaps through hiring, including using hiring flexibilities and other programs to increase hiring, opportunities exist to better monitor and evaluate its efforts and hiring process. FEMA inconsistently and inaccurately calculates how long it takes to hire staff of all positions, making it difficult to identify and address pain points in the hiring process. Additionally, FEMA lacks plans and performance measures to evaluate how effective its hiring efforts are reducing staffing gaps within cadres. By developing and documenting plans and performance measures to meet staffing targets, FEMA could better ensure it has the capacity to respond to current and emergent threats.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following three recommendations to FEMA:

The FEMA administrator should establish and document clear and consistent procedures to collect and calculate accurate time-to-hire information. (Recommendation 1)

The FEMA administrator should document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps in the disaster workforce. (Recommendation 2)

The FEMA administrator should develop performance measures to monitor and evaluate progress toward human capital goals, including net growth targets for cadres to achieve FEMA's long-term disaster workforce staffing goal. (Recommendation 3)

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DHS and FEMA for comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix I, DHS concurred with our three recommendations and described actions taken and planned to address

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them. FEMA also provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Administrator of FEMA. In addition, this report is available at no cost on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov/>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or [curriec@gao.gov](mailto:curriec@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris P. Currie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris P. Currie  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

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# Appendix I: Comments from the Federal Emergency Management Agency

**Appendix I: Comments from the Federal  
Emergency Management Agency**

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland  
Security**

April 12, 2023

Chris Currie  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-23-105663, "FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps"

Dear Mr. Currie,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's recognition that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) "currently faces an all-time high in disasters and an unparalleled demand on its workforce." GAO also acknowledged that FEMA has taken steps to address staffing gaps through hiring, including using hiring flexibilities to hire employees for critical positions and to augment its workforce if a disaster or emergency exceeds FEMA's capacity, such as with local hires and contractors, among others. FEMA remains committed to hiring qualified candidates whenever needed to assist in meeting its mission of helping people before, during and after disasters.

It is also important to more specifically highlight several recent initiatives designed to strengthen FEMA's disaster workforce. For example, on September 29, 2022, the President signed the "Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce Act of 2021," (Pub. Law No. 117-178)<sup>1</sup> providing "Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act" protections to FEMA reservists. By maximizing the use of these new protections as a recruiting and retention tool, FEMA will continue to expand this critical disaster workforce component. Additionally, in November 2022, FEMA published the "2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Recruitment Plan" (Recruitment Plan), the first plan of this scale,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/pub178/PLAW-117pub178.pdf>

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**Appendix I: Comments from the Federal  
Emergency Management Agency**

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which outlines FEMA's priority of building a more diverse workforce that offers promising practices and unique perspectives in the face of complexity and adversity.

The draft report contained three recommendations, with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

**JIM H CRUMPACKER** Digitally signed by JIM H  
CRUMPACKER  
Date: 2023.04.12 07:54:22 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations  
Contained in GAO-23-105663**

GAO recommended that the FEMA Administrator:

**Recommendation 1:** Establish and document clear and consistent procedures to collect and calculate accurate time-to-hire information.

**Response:** Concur. FEMA's Office of the Chief Component Human Capital Officer (CCHCO) Talent, Recruitment and Acquisition Division (TRAD) will create a time-to-hire job aid with specific data fields identified and train additional human resources (HR) employees to accurately pull time-to-hire data, which will address this recommendation and prepare the agency to meet its future mission requirements. Specifically, FEMA CCHCO TRAD will:

- Create a formal job aid to communicate the time-to-hire process with specific fields identified to use for accurate time-to-hire calculations by July 28, 2023.
- Train additional HR professionals to calculate time-to-hire to ensure redundancy and continuity of data across all reports by September 30, 2023.

When complete, these efforts will position FEMA to develop and maintain an ongoing, iterative process for continuous time-to-hire reporting with high data integrity. This improved reporting will provide FEMA with a dynamic process that will support, justify, and influence human capital decision-making reflective of the ever-changing workforce needed to meet FEMA's mission. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): September 29, 2023.

**Recommendation 2:** Document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps in the disaster workforce.

**Response:** Concur. FEMA is already taking actions that align with this recommendation and plans to take more in the future. For example, in November 2022, FEMA published its Recruitment Plan to achieve the agency's strategic priority of building a more diverse workforce that offers promising practices and unique perspectives in the face of complexity and adversity. This plan established four cross-agency goals to improve the agency's strategic recruitment efforts:

- Goal 1: Develop an enterprise-wide framework for recruitment and targeted outreach.
- Goal 2: Advance equitable and inclusive hiring practices.
- Goal 3: Invest in marketing and branding to educate the public of FEMA's mission, opportunities, and the benefits FEMA offers as an employer.

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**Appendix I: Comments from the Federal  
Emergency Management Agency**

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- Goal 4: Enhance FEMA’s capability to conduct effective and adaptive recruitment.

FEMA’s CCHCO is also developing an implementation plan to accompany the Recruitment Plan. This plan will provide additional details regarding how FEMA will achieve the goals and objectives set forth in the Recruitment Plan and document activities for monitoring and evaluating the agency’s hiring efforts to address staffing gaps in the disaster workforce. ECD: September 29, 2023.

**Recommendation 3:** Develop performance measures to monitor and evaluate progress towards human capital goals, including net growth targets for cadres to achieve FEMA’s long-term disaster workforce staffing goal.

**Response:** Concur. FEMA concurs with the importance of monitoring and evaluating progress toward achieving incident management workforce goals and has taken steps to do this. For example, subsequent to the issuance of the November 2022 Recruitment Plan, in 2023, FEMA’s Field Operations Directorate and FEMA’s 23 cadres finalized net growth targets for fiscal years (FY) 2023 through 2026 that reflect the force strength goal for each FY factoring in anticipated gains (hiring and progression) minus anticipated losses (attrition and progression) for each position in every cadre. These targets aim to map how each cadre should achieve force structure by the end of FY 2026, including setting hiring goals and informing succession planning so that the Agency can meet the conditions of its Government Performance and Results Act measure.

FEMA requests this recommendation be considered resolved and closed, as implemented.

# Accessible Text for Appendix I: Comments from the Federal Emergency Management Agency

April 12, 2023

Chris Currie  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-23-105663, “FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps”

Dear Mr. Currie,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO’s recognition that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) “currently faces an all-time high in disasters and an unparalleled demand on its workforce.” GAO also acknowledged that FEMA has taken steps to address staffing gaps through hiring, including using hiring flexibilities to hire employees for critical positions and to augment its workforce if a disaster or emergency exceeds FEMA’s capacity, such as with local hires and contractors, among others. FEMA remains committed to hiring qualified candidates whenever needed to assist in meeting its mission of helping people before, during and after disasters.

It is also important to more specifically highlight several recent initiatives designed to strengthen FEMA’s disaster workforce. For example, on September 29, 2022, the President signed the “Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce Act of 2021,” (Pub. Law No. 117-178)<sup>1</sup> providing “Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ178/PLAW-117publ178.pdf>

Rights Act” protections to FEMA reservists. By maximizing the use of these new protections as a recruiting and retention tool, FEMA will continue to expand this critical disaster workforce component. Additionally, in November 2022, FEMA published the “2022- 2026 FEMA Strategic Recruitment Plan” (Recruitment Plan), the first plan of this scale, which outlines FEMA’s priority of building a more diverse workforce that offers promising practices and unique perspectives in the face of complexity and adversity.

The draft report contained three recommendations, with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy and other issues under a separate cover for GAO’s consideration.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations  
Contained in GAO-23-105663**

GAO recommended that the FEMA Administrator:

Recommendation 1: Establish and document clear and consistent procedures to collect and calculate accurate time-to-hire information.

Response: Concur. FEMA’s Office of the Chief Component Human Capital Officer (CCHCO) Talent, Recruitment and Acquisition Division (TRAD) will create a time-to-hire job aid with specific data fields identified and train additional human resources (HR) employees to accurately pull time-to-hire data, which will address this recommendation and prepare the agency to meet its future mission requirements. Specifically, FEMA CCHCO TRAD will:

- Create a formal job aid to communicate the time-to-hire process with specific fields identified to use for accurate time-to-hire calculations by July 28, 2023.

- Train additional HR professionals to calculate time-to-hire to ensure redundancy and continuity of data across all reports by September 30, 2023.

When complete, these efforts will position FEMA to develop and maintain an ongoing, iterative process for continuous time-to-hire reporting with high data integrity. This improved reporting will provide FEMA with a dynamic process that will support, justify, and influence human capital decision-making reflective of the ever-changing workforce needed to meet FEMA's mission. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): September 29, 2023.

Recommendation 2: Document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps in the disaster workforce.

Response: Concur. FEMA is already taking actions that align with this recommendation and plans to take more in the future. For example, in November 2022, FEMA published its Recruitment Plan to achieve the agency's strategic priority of building a more diverse workforce that offers promising practices and unique perspectives in the face of complexity and adversity. This plan established four cross-agency goals to improve the agency's strategic recruitment efforts:

- Goal 1: Develop an enterprise-wide framework for recruitment and targeted outreach.
- Goal 2: Advance equitable and inclusive hiring practices.
- Goal 3: Invest in marketing and branding to educate the public of FEMA's mission, opportunities, and the benefits FEMA offers as an employer.
- Goal 4: Enhance FEMA's capability to conduct effective and adaptive recruitment.

FEMA's CCHCO is also developing an implementation plan to accompany the Recruitment Plan. This plan will provide additional details regarding how FEMA will achieve the goals and objectives set forth in the Recruitment Plan and document activities for monitoring and evaluating the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps in the disaster workforce. ECD: September 29, 2023.

Recommendation 3: Develop performance measures to monitor and evaluate progress towards human capital goals, including net growth targets for cadres to achieve FEMA's long-term disaster workforce staffing goal.

Response: Concur. FEMA concurs with the importance of monitoring and evaluating progress toward achieving incident management workforce goals and has taken steps to do this. For example, subsequent to the issuance of the November 2022 Recruitment Plan, in 2023, FEMA's Field Operations Directorate and FEMA's 23 cadres finalized net growth targets for fiscal years (FY) 2023 through 2026 that

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reflect the force strength goal for each FY factoring in anticipated gains (hiring and progression) minus anticipated losses (attrition and progression) for each position in every cadre. These targets aim to map how each cadre should achieve force structure by the end of FY 2026, including setting hiring goals and informing succession planning so that the Agency can meet the conditions of its Government Performance and Results Act measure.

FEMA requests this recommendation be considered resolved and closed, as implemented.

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## Appendix II: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

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### GAO Contact

Chris Currie, (404) 679-1875 or [curriec@gao.gov](mailto:curriec@gao.gov)

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### Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Joel Aldape (Assistant Director), Kelsey Hawley (Analyst-in-Charge), Koffi Dogbevi, Taylor Gauthier, Nasreen Badat, Melinda Cordero, Lijia Guo, Elizabeth Dretsch, Eric Hauswirth, Tracey King, and Jared Smith made significant contributions to this report.

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